

Looking Ahead to Better Service

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# **CSREES' Commitment to Enhancing Customer Service**

**To enhance customer service, CSREES is acting on recommendations from its Administrators Implementation Team.**

## **Recommendations CSREES is already addressing:**

1. Initiate immediate joint action to develop a “collaborative partnership” with land-grant and other institutions based on trust and shared leadership for policy and budget issues.
  - Initiating State Liaisons Program
  - Reinvigorating Partnership Working Group
2. Continue and maintain effective and efficient grants management.
  - Offering option of electronic submission in FY07
  - Improving communication through web site
3. Establish more direct communication between CSREES and the partner institutions.
  - Distributing agency news releases and announcements via e-mail listserv
  - Within institutions, working to share key information with appropriate partners
  - Transitioned on-line extension office directory to link directly to state extension office websites
  - Transformed CSREES newsletters to on-line, html versions
4. Increase the visibility of CSREES within the Department of Agriculture.
  - Improving reports of Agency/partnership activities, accomplishments and news in weekly reports to Undersecretary
  - Improving reports in monthly government wide reports to Undersecretary highlighting Agency's involvement in cross cutting activities to solve national problems
  - For Secretary, Deputy Secretary and Undersecretary use at events, developing topical hot issue sheets focusing on partners' work in research, extension and education by state
5. Realign CSREES and university expectations with respect to program reviews.
  - Providing more flexibility in scheduling
  - Giving more emphasis to CSREES and universities working together to identify specific issues to be addressed by reviews
  - Recommending individuals with specific areas of expertise for review teams
  - Within 30 days of completing reviews, submitting reports to institutions
6. Develop and share with the public a database index that includes basic information about, and demonstrates potential uses of, each database CSREES maintains.
  - Sharing One Solution's business definitions for our systems with partners

### **Recommendations CSREES is committed to addressing:**

1. Expand frank, open, candid, and frequent communication leading to common agenda.
  - Include stakeholders beyond partner institutions in deliberate process to identify and prioritize research, extension and education efforts.
  - Improve communications to more fully inform the system regarding policy and budget decisions.
  - Foster a collaborative partnership based on trust, open communication, and program and policy development under girded by a shared value system.
2. Synthesize and use knowledge gained from program reviews to inform portfolio analysis and other planning processes, and the development of requests for applications and other program guidance materials.
3. Identify and communicate critical science and education issues for national policy development.
  - Utilize input from stakeholders at all levels.
  - Use State Plan of Work (POW) stakeholder input as first line input for identifying national priorities.
  - Consolidate state priorities into national goals.
  - Consider extending “Science roadmap” model to education and extension functions.
4. Employ Agency’s national perspective to showcase the impact of universities’ work to decision makers and enhance public awareness of CSREES and its partner institutions. Facilitate the dissemination of high quality progress reports and impact statements.
  - Ask task force to develop/manage process for disseminating information about funded projects to public.
  - Recognize many excellent state publications highlighting the successes of grantees.
  - Have team, perhaps Agency’s communications staff, select and aggregate success stories into an innovative format.
  - Consider modifying/incorporating Agency’s collection of “impact” data into process.
  - Allow PDs/universities to track progress of submitted reports online.

### **Recommendations needing further definition:**

1. Initiate joint effort with partners to define role of National Program Leader (NPL). Consider reducing number of NPLs who have major leadership responsibilities and designating some NPLs as managers rather than leaders.
  - Undertake joint effort to mutually agree upon and understand NPL role, including delineation of NPLs management vs. leadership responsibilities.
  - Link State POW process to review of formula funded projects for relevance, quality and performance.

- Modify POW process so it can be used to help review Hatch projects.
- Enhance use of POW as way to improve review of Hatch projects.

## Background

In November 2004, the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) released a new Workforce Plan that delineates a five-year strategy for forecasting needs for recruiting and selecting future personnel and for retraining and/or restructuring the current workforce. The plan is specifically aimed at enabling the Agency to: (1) provide national leadership in high priority and new emerging areas of science; (2) utilize cutting-edge electronic technologies to implement e-government and enhance communications with partners, customers, and stakeholders; and (3) design and deliver programs that serve all Americans, especially non-traditional audiences. One key action of the Plan called for establishing and implementing agency-wide customer service standards and for securing customer feedback on the extent to which the Agency is achieving such standards.

In the spring of 2005, CSREES established customer service standards and engaged the Federal Consulting Group (FCG), a franchise of the Department of the Treasury, to design and administer survey questionnaires to three different customer groups: Administrators; Business Officers; and Grant Applicants and Recipients. In undertaking these responsibilities, FCG employed Claes Fornell International (CFI) to administer the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which was adopted as a gold standard for Federal government agencies in 1999. Beginning in mid-April 2005, CFI surveyed 5,000 individuals in CSREES' three customer groups and received 30% of the surveys back completed.

CFI delivered survey results in September 2005. Customers responded that the core strengths of CSREES include: (1) professional competencies and work ethic; (2) collaboration, working relationships and communications; and (3) service to all Americans. The survey also revealed that customers believe additional employees are needed to cover high priority areas of science and education. In addition, some misperceptions surfaced about the Agency's role in the Federal budget process and in the program reviews conducted at the request of universities.

CSREES has established an Implementation Team for each of the three customer groups surveyed. These teams are comprised of representatives from the customer groups and Agency employees. This report focuses on the results of surveys completed by Administrators and the recommendations of an Administrators Implementation Team (AIT) whose work commenced with an all-day meeting in Washington, DC on March 28, 2006. Members of the Partnership Working Group, formed to recommend and take actions that enhance and facilitate an effectively integrated partnership that creates, disseminates and applies knowledge to meet societal needs, were invited to participate in the AIT. In addition, representatives from non-land-grant institutions who receive CSREES funds were also involved.

## Standards and Survey Development

In 2003, a Service Standards Subcommittee of CSREES' Program Administration Coordination Effort (PACE), a group whose mission it is to enhance the Agency's federal administration processes by improving internal communication and collaboration, researched, drafted and vetted within the Agency standards for evaluating the services CSREES provides to its primary customers (i.e., colleges and universities, foundations, private businesses, and other grant recipients such as secondary schools).

Based on CSREES' desire to comprehensively evaluate its performance with respect to the breadth of services it provides, in 2004, a core team of Agency personnel broadened the PACE subcommittee's service standards and identified five corresponding drivers of customer satisfaction. These Agency-specific drivers were (1) coordination/leadership in areas of national need; (2) grant application, review processes, post-award management; (3) workforce competencies and responsiveness; (4) collaboration, working relationships and communications; and (5) service to all Americans.

Once the drivers of satisfaction were established, the core team of Agency personnel worked with Claes Fornell International (CFI) to draft questions that would measure CSREES' performance relative to each. Because of their divergent priorities and interactions with the Agency, it was determined that a separate set of questions would be necessary to accurately measure the satisfaction of each of three customer groups: Administrators, Business Officers, and Grant Applicants/Recipients. For each of the three customer groups, the goal was to obtain satisfaction scores for individual questions and, when respective scores were weighted, to obtain a satisfaction score for each driver, as well. A benefit of CFI's model is that it allows the Agency to measure the impact or expected change in overall customer satisfaction that could result from measured increases in driver satisfaction scores (both within and across customer groups). Finally, because the American Customer Satisfaction Index has been used to measure more than 100 programs of federal government agencies, CFI includes benchmarking questions that allow CSREES to compare itself to other agencies that provide similar services.

In February 2005, drafts of the customer service standards and the three surveys were provided to a Customer Satisfaction Survey Task Force for comment (see Appendix A for a membership list). The Task Force included representatives from the Agency and from its customer universities and organizations. Based on comments from the Task Force, the surveys were finalized and shared with Agency personnel.

## Overview of Survey Results - Administrators

On April 13, 2005 over 5,000 Administrators, Business Officers, and Grant Applicants/Recipients were invited via email to participate in CSREES' first customer service satisfaction survey. By May 25, 2005, over 1,330 people had responded for an overall response rate of 25%.

The following customer groups were targeted by CSREES to receive Administrators surveys: Administrators and Directors of State Extension Services, Directors of State Agricultural Experiment Stations, International Program Directors, Deans of Veterinary Medicine, Deans of Schools of Forestry, State Directors of Family and Consumer Science, Member of the Board of Human Sciences, Deans of Academic Programs, Administrative Heads of Agriculture, American Association of State Colleges of Agriculture and Renewable Resources Deans, 1994 Land-Grant Institutions' Presidents, Hispanic-Serving Institutions Presidents, and State 4-H Leaders. Of the 819 Administrators who were invited to participate in the survey, 221 responded for a response rate of 27%.

CSREES measured a broader customer base than most Federal agencies and surveyed customers about all of the services the Agency provides, rather than focusing on a particular aspect of the Agency's business (e.g., the website). However, for purposes of benchmarking with other agencies, Administrators overall satisfaction with CSREES or Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) is 65. This is similar to the CSI for all of the Federal government programs ACSI evaluated in 2004, 72, and is higher than the most similar scores (those given to NSF by its grant applicants in 1998), 58. However, the Administrators' CSI warrants special attention because it is the lowest of the three customer groups CSREES surveyed and indicates an area where the Agency can enhance its customer satisfaction with targeted efforts to improve its coordination/leadership in areas of national need.

Survey results indicate CSREES has some areas of relative strength. These include the Agency's efforts to provide services to all Americans (73) and the competencies and responsiveness of its workforce (73). With a score of 65, Administrators seem relatively neutral about CSREES' grant application, project/proposal review, and post-award management processes. Similarly, Administrators gave mixed marks to CSREES' collaboration, working relationships, and communications (64). While neither of those areas is a particular strengths for the Agency, neither is a strong driver of satisfaction, either.

Coordination/leadership in areas of national need is the lowest scoring driver in the survey (61) with the highest impact on Administrators overall satisfaction, making it an area to prioritize for improvements. In particular, Administrators scored the Agency low with respect to the results its University Program Reviews produce.

Administrators at non-land-grant colleges/universities rated CSREES the highest for nearly all drivers of satisfaction, except in the area of coordination/leadership where minority-serving Administrators rated CSREES the highest (67). 1862 land-grant Administrators are the least satisfied of the colleges and universities measured, rating CSREES the lowest for all drivers of satisfaction.

Nearly half of the respondents surveyed had been working in an administrative position for ten or more years. Administrators with three years or less tenure rated CSREES the highest, while respondents with longer tenure in their positions rated CSREES considerably lower. This is primarily due to the difference in perception about CSREES' coordination/leadership in areas of national need, where longer tenured Administrators are significantly less satisfied (58).

## **Administrators Implementation Team**

In December 2005, the Administrator of CSREES, Dr. Colien Hefferan, invited Deans and Directors from Land-Grant and other universities to participate in AIT to help the Agency interpret the results of its first customer service satisfaction survey and recommend actions that would enhance the Agency's services to university partners (see Appendix B for a membership list). The Team reviewed the Agency's Customer Service Standards and the Final Report on CSREES' Customer Service Satisfaction Survey produced by CFI and participated in a series of conference calls in preparation for an all day meeting in Washington, DC on March 28, 2006 (see Appendix C. for Agenda).

As part of the March 28, 2006 meeting, participants were assigned to one of three workgroups. From the university partner's perspective, each of the three workgroups was asked to evaluate the Agency's coordination/leadership in areas of national need. Each workgroup was also tasked to evaluate the Agency's performance with respect to a second driver from the survey: collaboration, working relationships and communications; workforce needs; and grants administration. Workgroups were encouraged to describe the ideal Agency role, and propose services for achieving their expectations (initiatives, policies, programs to introduce, expand, enhance, etc.). Workgroup reports included the following recommendations for enhancing the Agency's customer service:

### **Recommendations to Enhance CSREES' Leadership**

- 1. Initiate immediate joint action to develop a "collaborative partnership" with land-grant and other institutions based on trust and shared leadership for policy and budget issues.**
- 2. Continue and maintain effective and efficient grants management.**
- 3. Initiate frank, open, candid, and frequent communication leading to a common agenda.**

Land-Grant Universities and other institutions want to be viewed as partners of the Agency, and not customers. Administrators feel that the real customers are the end users of information resulting from the partners' combined efforts. They suggested that the Agency's focus has shifted away from the partnership to management activities and policy issues. While Administrators perceive that management activities are functioning well, they believe that the Agency's leadership role and the partnership have suffered.

Some Administrators view the partnership as broken and in need of repair. Other Administrators stress that the Agency needs to continue to be responsive, trustful, cooperative, and considerate. Some partners express a lack of trust in the Agency. They are concerned that collaboration on priority-setting has diminished and ask that the Agency include stakeholders beyond the partner institutions in a deliberate process to

identify and prioritize research, extension and education efforts. Administrators want CSREES to improve its communications with the system and involve the system more fully in policy and budget decisions. They note that by improving partners' access to information, the Agency can facilitate partners' advocacy on the Agency's behalf.

University partners perceive the ideal Agency role as “**A collaborative partnership based on trust, a shared leadership and budget, open communication, and joint policy development under girded by a shared value system**”.

They suggest addressing the following questions to understand the current situation and improve on it:

- What is the Agency's view of its leadership role?
- What are the Agency's expectations?
- What are the Agency's relationships with partner institutions and their faculties?
- What should be the Agency's role with other government agencies?
- Who establishes the role of the Agency?
- How are priorities set?

**4. Initiate joint effort with partners to define the role of National Program Leader (NPL).**

**5. Consider reducing the number of NPLs who have major leadership responsibilities and designating some NPLs as managers rather than leaders.**

With its partners, CSREES should undertake a joint effort to mutually agree upon and understand the National Program Leader (NPL) role, including the delineation of NPLs management versus leadership responsibilities. The Administrators communicated that the leadership role of NPLs has changed over time, becoming clouded by their increasing grants management responsibilities and corresponding disconnect from leadership activities. Administrators believe the following questions need to be resolved through joint Agency/partner efforts:

- What should be the role of NPLs?
- Who do they lead?
- What is the Agency's view of the role of NPLs?
- What are NPL expectations?
- What are partner institutions' expectations of NPLs?
- Who should be involved in defining the role of NPLs?

**6. Report back to the partner institutions on an annual basis regarding a summary of the last year's reviews. This report should cover broad aspects and changes that are going on in the universities. This report could be by discipline.**

CSREES should have NPLs who conduct reviews to summarize major changes or situations taking place on campuses that would be interest to the partner institutions. These summaries should be compiled into one report and made available to the partner institutions on an annual basis.

**7. Identify and communicate the critical science and education issues of national policy development.**

CSREES should use a bottom-up approach to identify priorities by establishing a standard process of using state identified priorities, consolidate these into regional priorities using the regional structure. Then, consolidate these regional priorities into a set of national priorities. This will require input from stakeholders at all levels. Specific mention was made of the need to include the input of the agricultural experiment stations in the priorities for the National Research Initiative (NRI). The “science roadmap” is an example of the type of output Administrators desire from the improved process. Administrators are curious whether the Agency could enhance formula fund accountability by linking formula funds to NRI grants.

**8. Link Plan of Work process to review of formula funded projects for relevance, quality and performance.**

CSREES should modify the Plan of Work (POW) process so that it can be used to help review Hatch projects. This would enhance the use of the POW as a way to improve the review of the Hatch projects.

**9. Establish more direct communication between CSREES and the partner institutions.**

CSREES should expand and encourage the exchange of Agency NPLs with personnel from partner institutions so that each learns more about the situations and issues the other faces. The NPL liaison program should help to address this communications but expanded or longer term exchanges would be even more beneficial. It would benefit the partnership to establish a regular “retreat” where NPLs and personnel from partner institutions could gather to discuss and plan joint activities. Building on the business officers’ positive response to the annual CSREES Administrative Officers’ Meeting, CSREES should initiate an “orientation” type workshop to teach other personnel at partner institutions how CSREES functions.

**10. Increase the visibility of CSREES within the Department of Agriculture.**

Outside of Research, Education, and Economics, CSREES is not very visible within the Department of Agriculture. As a small agency, it is important that CSREES continue to communicate about sponsored activities through Weekly Reports to the Secretary and its partners. CSREES should look for additional opportunities to enhance its visibility.

**11. Program reviews: Align CSREES and university expectations with respect to program reviews. Administrators want CSREES to critically assess the current situation in their colleges/departments, as well as their future plans. When Administrators voice specific concerns relative to program reviews, they want the Agency to focus attention on those areas.**

CSREES should clearly communicate with partners about the Agency's goals and processes with respect to program reviews. Facilitate the sharing of high quality information prior to reviews, provide Administrators with an example of an excellent submission the Agency has received. Provide universities with feedback from program reviews in a timely manner.

**12. Enhance public awareness of CSREES and its partner institutions.**

**13. Reporting on science: Clarify the Agency's role with respect to disseminating information about funded projects. Administrators want CSREES to employ its national perspective to showcase the impact of universities' work to decision makers. Administrators believe such a publication would facilitate the submission of high quality progress reports.**

CSREES should ask a task force to develop and manage a process for disseminating information about funded projects to the public. The Agency should recognize that there are many excellent state publications highlighting the successes of grantees. Have a team, perhaps the Agency's communications staff, select and aggregate these success stories into a national web based forum/journal. The web based publication should be formatted so that it can be downloaded and printed for use as a hard copy for distribution. Perhaps the Agency's collection of "impact" data could be modified or incorporated into this process. Administrators want the Agency to alter its process for reviewing Current Research Information System (CRIS) reports to facilitate NPLs rejection of unsatisfactory reports. Allow PDs/universities to track the progress of submitted reports online.

## **Recommendations to Enhance CSREES' Collaboration, Working Relationships, and Communications**

Administrators believe CSREES can improve the usefulness of the databases it maintains. They advise that some of the Agency's databases are being used for purposes that they were not intended to serve, i.e. CRIS, while others, i.e. the Research, Education, and Economics Information System, are not well known. The Agency should develop and share with the public a database index that includes basic information about, and demonstrates potential uses of, each database CSREES maintains.

## **Recommendations to Meet CSREES' Workforce Needs**

Administrators understand that it is difficult to attract qualified people to fill Agency positions in the Washington, DC area. They suggest the reasons for this include salaries that are not competitive with those in the private sector or at most partner institutions, the high cost of housing, and the typically long, congested commutes. A number of nontraditional approaches to recruiting and retaining highly qualified NPLs and Program Managers were discussed. However, before considering any of them, Administrators suggest that CSREES needs to refocus the role of the NPL (as discussed in items 4. and 5. under Recommendations to Enhance CSREES' Leadership). This includes carefully redefining vacant positions with respect to the leadership versus management responsibilities they entail and hiring based on the skill set needed.

Once these tasks have been accomplished, Administrators recommend the Agency explore the following alternatives: using NSF's short-term temporary model to fill Program Manager positions, dispersing NPLs to partner institutions using electronic connectivity, increasing telework options, and employing Intergovernmental Personnel Act assignments and Shared Faculty appointments from partner institutions to address emerging critical agricultural issues. Finally, Administrators ask the Agency to work with its partners to promote increased number of PhD graduates to address the expected future shortage across the system.

## **Recommendations to Enhance CSREES' Grants Administration**

Administrators believe CSREES should release RFAs as soon as possible; when the Agency must delay the release of an RFA, it should be transparent regarding the reason. Be more predictable with respect to the emphasis areas funded on a continuing basis and the release dates for annual RFAs. Allow applicants more time between the release of RFAs and their submission deadlines.

## **Timeline for Action by CSREES**

There was general consensus from the partner participants in the workshop that action needs to begin as soon as possible on AIT's recommendations. It was expressed that there is a current "crisis" in the partnership and therefore CSREES and the partner institutions should immediately initiate efforts to address the Team's recommendations.

## Recommendations for Future Satisfaction Surveys

At the conclusion of the March 28, 2006 AIT meeting, participants were asked to respond to the following questions. A brief discussion ensued and the following suggestions were recorded.

1. How long should CSREES wait before conducting another review of the Agency's customer service?

Three years, although this depends on the questions the Agency plans to ask.

2. In future customer service surveys, should the Agency change its drivers of satisfaction or use the same ones?

There was no recommendation to drop any of the current drivers of satisfaction. Suggestions for additional drivers/topics for the next survey, included: trust between CSREES and partner institutions, the role of National Program Leaders, expansion of the focus to be more inclusive of extension and teaching, and expansion on various aspects of leadership.

3. Are there recommendations regarding the length of the survey or the number of questions asked?

No recommendations were made.

4. Who should get the survey next time?

Some of the questions on the previous survey were not appropriate for the responders. Therefore, the summary of results may not reflect the actual representative response. To more accurately utilize the survey results, a more careful selection of questions or groups to respond to the survey should be initiated.

5. Is there a better way for the Agency to get input from the system regarding customer satisfaction?

It was suggested that retreats or workshops in each region might be an alternative method for gathering this input.

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\*Member of Partnership Working Group

## Appendix C

### ADMINISTRATORS IMPLEMENTATION TEAM FOR ENHANCING CUSTOMER SERVICE SATISFACTION

#### AGENDA

March 28, 2006, Waterfront Centre, Room 3455

8:00 a.m.	Coffee	
8:30	Welcome and Introductions	Larry Miller
9:15	Charge to Team: Anticipated Outcomes and Agency Follow Through	Larry Miller
9:30	CSSS Results	
	• Most Encouraging Findings	Mary Gray
	- Interpretation/Rationale	Sam Donald
	• Most Surprising/Discouraging Findings	Dennis Kopp
	- Interpretation/Rationale	Colin Kaltenbach
10:10	Break	
10:30	Workgroup Designations and Responsibilities	Larry Miller
10:45	Workgroup Deliberations (Topic 1 – Leadership)	
	• Group 1, room 3455	Chair – Robert Whitson
	- Leadership	Facilitator – Richard Hegg
	- Collaboration, Working Relationships, and Communication	
	• Group 2, room 4103	Chair – Ian Maw
	- Leadership	Facilitator – J. Preston Jones
	- Workforce Needs	
	• Group 3, room 4249	Chair – John Thomson
	- Leadership	Facilitator – Erin Daly
	- Grants Administration	
12:00 p.m.	Lunch	

1:00	Workgroup Deliberations (Topic 2 )	
2:15	Break	
2:30	Workgroup Reports and Discussion	Moderators – Reg Gomes James Wangberg
3:30	Agency Response and Commitment	Colien Hefferan
4:30	Recommendations for Future CSS Surveys Timeframe Drivers of Satisfaction Questions per Driver Sample(s) and Increasing Participation	Richard Hegg
5:30	Adjourn	Larry Miller